

The Value of Tabletop Exercises

The tragic impact of the March 11, 2011, Japanese earthquake and tsunami is certain to raise questions among top management and employees with regard to the effectiveness and readiness of their company's emergency response plan. A recent CNN news poll indicated that only 20% of the responders had faith in the government's ability to respond to emergencies. Fortunately we are not often faced with disasters of such a magnitude but incidents impacting business activities occur on a regular basis. Many companies operate in an international arena and must deal with a number of international incidents which affect regular operations. How well these are dealt with will impact employee morale, business operations, the reputation of the organization's security function, and of course the "bottom line." Is your company's plan ready and able to deal with the following?

- Evacuations
- Employee relocation
- Kidnapping/ransom demands
- Employee assassination
- Hostage situations
- Workplace violence and related employee issues
- Public sector incident command systems and related protocols
- Weather related disasters
- Explosions or major fires
- Supply chain disruptions and inability to meet customer demands

Above are just a few situations that may be confronted during a crisis. The time to initially address these situations is not at the time the event occurs, but in an environment that allows for discussion, learning, and plan adjustment without the pressure of loss of human life or significant business disruption. This can be accomplished through tabletop exercise training. The tabletop exercise is an invaluable tool for the Crisis Management Team to gain experience and to understand the dynamics and processes of crisis management. The Crisis Management Team is usually comprised of security, facilities, human resources, operations, health and safety, information systems, finance and a designated team lead. A small company's team may consist of only a few managers but they will still have to address many of the same response and recovery issues as a large company.

A tabletop exercise provides the Crisis Management Team members and alternates with a scenario involving a simulated critical incident. It is presented in a narrative format; participants respond to a sequence of problems related to the critical incident. Using the facts available to them, the participants discuss the situation, determine priorities, and solve problems in a team. The processes learned and practiced in the scenario lay the foundation for responding to an actual event.

The tabletop exercise is a cost effective method of providing the Crisis Management Team with the opportunity to build teamwork, improve coordination, and validate the emergency response plan. Exercises also reveal planning weaknesses and identify areas that need improvement.

The tabletop exercise should be designed to meet the following objectives:

- Provide feedback
- Clarify responsibilities
- Identify roles
- Enhance skills
- Assess capabilities
- Evaluate performance
- Measure and deploy resources
- Motivate employees

In order to accomplish these objectives the tabletop exercise must be designed to engage **all** members of the Crisis Management Team in a scenario that involves the critical processes of the organization. And, the scenario must be one that is realistic with regard to its probability of a real life occurrence.

Obtainment of the above objectives is best accomplished if the persons designing and facilitating the tabletop exercise have extensive experience in crisis management and response from both the public and private sectors. This provides tabletop participants with a breath of knowledge and experience where the many processes and situations discussed can transfer to numerous other types of critical incidents. A company spending the time and resources in planning and conducting tabletop exercises with senior management should not fall short in achieving its goals through persons with little experience in the tabletop design and emergency response.

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